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ABSTRACT

The concept of the agenda setting function of the mass media holds that apart from any influence they may have on voter attitudes or behavior, the mass media apparently influence voters' perceptions of the importance of the issues. The agenda setting function of the mass media is analyzed for significance in this investigation. A panel study of nearly 250 voters in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1972 offered an opportunity to test the agenda setting influence of televised political advertising during the Nixon-McGovern campaign. The data from this study provide contradictory evidence on the agenda setting influences of televised political advertising for presidential candidates. However, advertising in newspapers and radio did not appear to be agenda setting. (RB)

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A Test of the Agenda-Setting Influence of Televised Political Advertising

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A paper presented by the Advertising Division of the Association for Education in Journalism at its annual meeting in Ottawa, Canada, August 16-19, 1975.

The concept of the agenda-setting function of the mass media holds that apart from any influence they may have on voter attitudes or behavior, the mass media apparently influence voters' perception of the salience or importance of the issues. Stated another way, the voter's agenda--the issues he considers most important--is somewhat influenced by the emphasis given to those issues by the media to which he is exposed during the campaign.[1] The agenda-setting influence is not limited to the news content of the media; an earlier study by the author showed a close correspondence between voters' agendas and the content of political advertising in newspapers.[2]

The evidence of the agenda-setting influence of political advertising is not surprising, however, for one purpose of product advertising is very much akin to the notion of agenda-setting in the mind of consumers. This purpose is to develop or maintain a level of awareness or familiarity for the brand. The Lavidge and Steiner model, for example, says that prior to purchasing a product, a consumer moves through a series of steps: unawareness, awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction, and purchase. It is true, of course, that this is an over-simplification of what happens in some cases. For example, consumers sometimes make impulse purchases--they buy a product they had never heard of or seen before. On the other hand, in the case of habitual purchases, it is difficult to separate the steps.[3]

Nevertheless, advertising can help move consumers from unawareness to purchase, and such a function is particularly important at the early stages--the creation of awareness. Later, factors such as word-of-mouth knowledge or prior brand experience might become more important than advertising. Leo Bogart describes how a typical consumer is exposed to advertising for a wide variety of brands in a product category and probably has difficulty remembering details of any of that advertising. "Yet that advertising, sustained over the years, helps her to make quality distinctions among brands, so that when she comes into the store she has both a preference (not a clear cut one, but a general tendency, perhaps) and also a range of acceptability for other brands....Advertising thus serves that primary function of placing a brand within the spectrum of what is acceptable."[4]

The goal is to do more than just build awareness, however. The advertiser also tries to develop an association between the brand name and some attribute of the product--to try to teach the consumer something about the brand. This is attempted by placing the brand in a narrow product category and defining it as the leading brand in that category--on top of the category agenda.[5] For example, Seven-Up is not just another soft drink--it is an uncola drink, and its advertising seeks to place it on top of consumers' uncola drink agenda. In a direct advertising confrontation with Goodyear, B.F. Goodrich defined itself as the top brand on the agenda of American-made radial tires and climbed from last place to second place on that agenda.[6]

There are close parallels between the role of advertising described above and the role of advertising in setting the candidate agenda in the campaign. Concepts like awareness, familiarity, range of acceptability,

top-of-mind association, and the ladder of brand preference bear striking resemblance to the agenda-setting notion of telling people "what to think about." Much product advertising is designed to bring brand names to the top of consumers' agendas in the hopes those brands will then be purchased. In the same way, the purpose of much political advertising is to increase the awareness or salience of the candidate's "brand name"--to move it to the top of the voters' agendas. Just as with consumer products, political advertising also seeks to define candidates as being number one on certain agendas--the presidential stature agenda, the welfare give-away agenda, or the honesty agenda. This is much more likely to be true during a general election than in a primary, when candidates must often strive for simple awareness.

During the political campaign, then, candidates play active roles in the agenda-setting process. In fact, they become agenda-setters and try to convey their agendas to voters through the media. Several months before the election, the candidate ascertains the relative importance of problems voters perceive. While some candidates still rely upon intuition, many spend large amounts of money for sophisticated and expensive polls to learn salient public issues and voter feelings about those issues. Relying primarily upon those polls, the candidate sets his agenda--the issues he will emphasize during the campaign.

The candidate then seeks to transmit that agenda to the voters. Since it is virtually impossible to deliver that message personally to all voters, the candidate must rely upon the media. Therefore, the candidate's agenda helps determine the media agenda. The candidate can exercise direct control through his advertising, and can exercise indirect influence by making

speeches and policy statements on the issues, behavior he hopes will be reported by the media. His objective, of course, is to convince voters he is better qualified to handle the problems the voters consider important.[7]

A panel study of nearly 250 voters in Charlotte, N. C., in 1972 offered an opportunity to test the agenda-setting influence of televised political advertising. Personal interviews sought information about what issues voters considered most important as well as the media to which they were exposed. At the same time, the evening network news programs and local newspapers were content analyzed to ascertain the agenda of the news media.

HOW WELL DID AGENDA-SETTING WORK IN CHARLOTTE?

The candidate evaluates the effectiveness of his agenda-setting on election day: if he wins, he probably considers it effective; if he loses, he probably considers it ineffective. From a research perspective, however, we were interested in more than whether the candidate won. We were interested in how well the candidate agenda was conveyed in the media and how well the voters learned that agenda.

Agenda Transmittal and Correspondence

One question, of course, is how closely the candidates' agendas corresponded to the voter agenda. Since we did not have access to strategy statements, we inferred candidate agendas from their advertising. This was reasonable since the candidates control their advertising content. The

content of the advertising was ascertained by monitoring the three television networks during prime time on weeknights for the three weeks voters were being interviewed. All Nixon and McGovern commercials, regardless of length, were coded for the frequency with which certain issue themes were mentioned. These frequencies were summed to give the candidates' agendas of issues in their advertising.[8]

The agendas of the voters, the candidates, and the news media are compared in Table 1, and the rank-order correlations among the agendas are presented in Table 2. The correlations (Spearman's rho, corrected for ties) between the voter agenda and the candidates' agendas were low: +.11 for the Nixon agenda and +.37 for the McGovern agenda. These low correlations are partially due to the way the voter agenda was determined. Voters were asked to name the problem they were most concerned about; that made it unlikely they would name a candidate's personality as a problem. Candidate advertising, on the other hand, included many references to such personality traits as honesty and credibility. If the personality item is removed from the candidates' and the voter agenda, the correlations become .38 for Nixon and .63 for McGovern. This low correspondence might be explained in a couple of ways. First, candidate polling to ascertain voter concerns, if done at all, is usually done very early in the campaign. Candidates might set their agenda at that time, but voter concerns could change by the end of the campaign. Second, even if the candidates do have up-to-the-minute readings of voter concerns, their selection of issues can still be influenced by factors other than voter polls. Candidates can either avoid certain voter concerns (like Nixon avoiding the Watergate/corruption issue) or else they consider some issues to be more important than the voters do (like Nixon's emphasis upon relations with Russia and China).

Tables 1 and 2 about here.

Another question is how well the candidates' agendas were transmitted into the media agenda. This was evaluated by comparing the issue salience in the candidate's advertising with the issue salience in the media news content: the closer the correspondence, the more successful the candidates were in getting their agendas transmitted.

If the candidates did try to transmit their agendas to voters through the mass media news stories, they were not successful. There was no correlation between the agenda of issues reported in the Charlotte Observer and the agenda of the two presidential candidates, and the correlations between the candidates' advertising agendas and the television news agenda were very low. This lack of correspondence illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 shows the difficulty candidates have in trying to get their agendas transmitted via the media. Candidates are often forced to deviate from their planned agenda of issues during the campaign. George McGovern, for example, made several speeches on Vietnam late in the 1972 campaign because his staff believed it would bring in more contributions from supporters already committed to him and not because the staff or the candidate felt it was a particularly important issue.[9]

The news media, of course, act independently and sometimes defiantly refuse to "follow" a candidate's agenda. Many of the reporters covering John Lindsay in the 1972 primaries, for example, were apparently so concerned with exposing him as a shallow, media image candidate that they did not report what he was saying about issues.[10] One of the reasons candidates use

advertising, of course, is because they have more control over the content and are sometimes able to counter or correct the unfavorable treatment they receive in the news media.

Who Saw the Advertising?

Another question is whether the voters were exposed to the advertising, since they could not learn anything unless they saw it. Exposure to advertising is difficult to measure, however. Because it would have been impractical to observe voters' exposure to advertising, we had to rely upon their memory and ask them how much advertising they could recall seeing for each of the two candidates.

It is logical that persons who watch television a great deal would see and recall more political advertising than persons who watched less television. Atkin et. al. found such a relationship and reported that voters really could not avoid political advertising on television.[11] We hypothesized, therefore, that high use of television for political news would be positively related to high recall of televised political advertising and low use to low recall.

Voters who reported high use of television were significantly more likely to recall seeing commercials for the candidates than were voters who reported low use of television. (See Tables 3 and 4.) The hypothesis was supported: exposure to television is related to exposure to commercials and is probably most likely due to incidental exposure.

Tables 3 and 4 about here.

About one-third of the respondents reported they could not recall seeing any advertising for either of the two candidates. Even if these voters did see some political advertising, it apparently did not make a lasting impression. However, the interviews were conducted in October, and candidates typically step up their advertising pressure during the last days of the campaign. It could be, then, that this later volume of advertising might have overcome the voters' barriers of inattention.

But what kinds of voters could recall seeing political advertising? For one thing, they were more likely to be white than black. Tables 5 and 6 show that white voters were more likely to recall seeing "many" commercials for both Nixon and McGovern than black voters. In the case of McGovern ads, at least, exposure to or recall of the advertising was also related to income: as income increased, so did the proportion of voters who could recall seeing "many" of his commercials. There was evidence of a similar relationship in the case of Nixon advertising, but it was not as strong. (See Tables 7 and 8.) Surlin and Gordon have also reported greater recall of political advertising for voters higher in socioeconomic status.[12] Unfortunately, there were too few McGovern supporters in the survey to permit any analysis of possible selective exposure or recall of the advertising.[13]

Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8 about here.

What Did Voters Learn from the Advertising?

Our ultimate interest, of course, was the cognitive effects of the advertising--whether the voters learned anything from the advertising they saw. One thing they could have learned was the candidates' agendas of

issues. The correspondence between the agenda of issues recalled from the advertising and the actual advertising agenda would be one measure of voter learning. Since the repetition of themes in ads gradually builds up the salience of certain issues which one associates with a candidate, we hypothesized that high exposure to a candidate's advertising would be positively related to accuracy in recalling the issue salience of that advertising. In other words, the agenda of voters who could recall seeing "many" commercials for a candidate would more closely match the candidate's advertising agenda than would the agenda of voters who could recall seeing only a "few" commercials.

The hypothesized relationship was true in the case of McGovern advertising: the rank order correlation was .20 for voters recalling "many" commercials and -.42 for those recalling "a few." In the case of Nixon advertising, however, the relationship did not hold: the correlation was .38 for voters recalling "many" and .60 for those recalling "a few." Even in the case where the predicted relationship was evident (McGovern), the correlation was low. This fact--plus the difficulty of separating what was learned from the news content and what was learned from advertising--prevented any definitive conclusions about what voters learned from the advertising.

It is likely that voters learn more than just the agenda of issues in the candidates' advertising: they probably learn "affect" or feeling as well as the issue information. In short, voters acquire affect about the candidates along with the more issue-oriented advertising content. This would seem to be more true in the case of voters who were exposed to a great deal of television advertising. By combining sight, sound and motion, television is better able to convey emotional feelings or to evoke those feelings in viewers than are other media. This affect, of course,

may be negative as well as positive. We hypothesized, therefore, that high exposure to television advertising is positively related to high affect in describing a candidate, low exposure to low affect.

The salience of affect was operationalized as the obvious presence of feeling in the voter's role-playing description of each candidate to a friend. The wording of the question encouraged the voters to include personality items in their descriptions of the candidates.[14]

The hypothesis failed in the case of Nixon: his commercials apparently did not generate much affect among the respondents. In fact, as Table 9 indicates, voters who could recall few or no Nixon commercials expressed greater salience of affect than voters who had seen many commercials. To some extent, this may have resulted from the fact that voters had long seen Nixon on television. His commercials--and there were many in which he did not appear--may have reinforced older views rather than raised new affective saliences. In addition, some analyses of the election results suggested that voters held stronger feelings about McGovern (both positive and negative) than about Nixon, toward whom many voters apparently felt neutral.[15]

For the McGovern advertising, however, the hypothesis was supported, as Table 10 reports. There was greater salience of affect by voters who could recall many McGovern commercials than by those who could recall none. Much of that affect was negative, too. McGovern's was a new face at the presidential level and he was not well-known. Hence, voters had a greater need for orientation about him--more "room" to learn new information and feelings. McCombs has cited orientational need in explaining why newspaper editorials were more influential when talking about relatively minor issues,

about which people knew little, than about major issues or candidates where people already had well-developed feelings or information.[16]

Tables 9 and 10 about here.

SUMMARY

The data from this study provide contradictory evidence for the agenda-setting influence of televised political advertising for presidential candidates. There was not an exceptionally close correspondence between the candidates' and the voters' agendas. McGovern's agenda more closely matched the voters' agenda, but the rank order correlation was just barely significant at the .05 level. Likewise, the correlations between the candidates' and the media agenda were even lower. Voters who could recall commercials apparently learned the issues from the McGovern advertising agenda better than the Nixon advertising agenda. Similarly, voters who could recall seeing many McGovern commercials exhibited a higher salience of affect in describing McGovern than did voters who could not recall seeing many of his commercials.

TABLE 1. A comparison of the agendas of voters, candidates, and media in October.

VOTERS	NIXON	McGOVERN	NEWSPAPER	NATIONAL TV NEWS
1. Economy	1. Personality	1. Personality	1. Vietnam	1. Vietnam
2. Vietnam	2. Vietnam	2. Economy	2. Busing	2. Economy
3. Drugs	3. For.Relations	3. Vietnam	3. Corruption	3. Corruption
4. Welfare	4. Welfare	4. Welfare	4. Crime	4. For.Relations
5. Education	5. Environment	5. Corruption	5. For.Relations	5. Busing
6. Corruption	6. Economy	6. Environment	6. Environment	6. Drugs
7. Crime	7. Drugs	6. Defense	7. Economy	7. Environment
8. Busing	7. Busing	6. Busing	7. Education	8. Crime*
9. Environment	7. Defense	9. For.Relations	9. Drugs	8. Education*
10. For.Relations	10. 18-yr-vote	9. Drugs	10. Personality	8. Personality*
11. Defense	11. Crime	9. Crime	11. Defense	8. Defense*
12. 18-yr-vote*	12. Education*	12. 18-yr-vote*	12. Welfare*	8. Welfare*
13. Personality*	13. Corruption*	13. Education*	12. 18-yr-vote*	8. 18-yr-vote*

* = no mentions

TABLE 2. Spearman's rank-order correlations among the agendas.

	Voters	Nixon	McGovern	Newspaper	TV News
Voters	--	.11	.37		
Nixon	.38*	--	.65[a]	-.05	.22
McGovern	.63*[b]		--	.06	.25
Newspaper					
TV News					

---

* "Personality" item deleted from agendas

[a] $p < .01$

[b] $p < .05$

TABLE 3. Relationship between use of television for political news and recall of Nixon commercials.

Use of Television for Political News	Recall of Nixon Commercials: None	Few	Many	Total	(N)
Not at all	45.5%	54.5%	---	100%	(11)
Very little	60.9	34.8	1.0	100	(23)
Some	30.5	57.3	12.2	100	(82)
Great deal	26.6	45.2	28.2	100	(124)

Chi Square = 22.47, df = 6, $p < .01$

TABLE 4. Relationship between use of television for political news and recall of McGovern commercials.

Use of Television For Political News	Recall of McGovern Commercials: None	Few	Many	Total	(N)
Not at all	72.7%	27.3%	---	100%	(11)
Very little	59.1	40.9	---	100	(22)
Some	28.9	59.0	12.0	100	(83)
Great deal	28.7	51.6	19.7	100	(122)

Chi Square = 20.76, df = 6, $p < .01$

TABLE 5. Relationship between race and recall of Nixon ads.

	Recall of Nixon Ads				
Race	None	Few	Many	Total	(N)
White	28.6%	51.0%	20.4%	100%	(206)
Black	50.8	37.7	11.5	100	(61)

Chi Square = 10.63, df = 2, $p < .01$

TABLE 6. Relationship between race and recall of McGovern ads.

	Recall of McGovern ads				
Race	None	Few	Many	Total	(N)
White	30.0%	54.2%	15.8%	100%	(203)
Black	54.8	37.1	8.1	100	(62)

Chi Square = 12.92, df = 2, $p < .01$

TABLE 7. Relationship between income and recall of Nixon ads.

	Recall of Nixon ads				
Income	None	Few	Many	Total	(N)
less than $5,000	42.4%	48.5%	9.1%	100%	(33)
$5-10,000	40.2	37.9	21.8	100	(87)
over $10,000	27.6	52.8	19.7	100	(127)

Chi Square = 7.77 (ns)

TABLE 8. Relationship between income and recall of McGovern ads.

	Recall of McGovern ads				
Income	None	Few	Many	Total	(N)
less than $5,000	48.5%	48.5%	3.0%	100%	(33)
$5-10,000	46.0	43.7	10.3	100	(87)
over $10,000	26.4	53.6	20.0	100	(125)

Chi Square = 14.72, df = 4, $p < .01$

TABLE 9. Relationship between recall of Nixon commercials and salience of affect in describing Nixon.

Recall of Nixon Commercials	Salience of Affect: Low	High	Total	(N)
None	63.8%	36.2%	100%	(72)
Few	63.1	36.9	100	(103)
Many	82.2	17.8	100	(45)

Chi Square = 5.76, (ns)

TABLE 10. Relationship between recall of McGovern commercials and salience of affect in describing McGovern.

Recall of McGovern commercials	Salience of Affect: Low	High	Total	(N)
None	66.7%	33.3%	100%	(72)
Few	46.8	53.2	100	(111)
Many	45.7	54.3	100	(35)

Chi Square = 7.83, df = 2 , $p < .05$

REFERENCES

[1]The research literature related to the agenda-setting function has become too voluminous to list here. The benchmark study was reported in "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald E. Shaw, Public Opinion Quarterly, 36: 176-87 (Summer 1972).

[2]"Newspaper Political Advertising and the Agenda-Setting Function," Journalism Quarterly, 50: 552-56 (Autumn 1973).

[3]Robert J. Lavidge and Gary A. Steiner, "A Model for Predictive Measurements of Advertising Effectiveness," in Arnold M. Barban and C. H. Sandage (eds.) Readings in Advertising and Promotion Strategy, (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1968), pp. 223-38.

[4]Leo Bogart, Strategy in Advertising, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 76.

[5]Jack Trout and Al Ries, "The Positioning Era Cometh," Advertising Age, April 24, 1972, p. 35.

[6]P. C. Ross, "Goodrich, Not Goodyear Works at Telling It Straight," Advertising Age, October 7, 1974, p. 63.

[7]For a more detailed description of candidate agenda-setting behavior and its concomitant problems, see the author's "Political Advertising: Setting the Candidate's Agenda," Journal of Communication, forthcoming.

[8]Inter-coder reliability was .88.

[9]Ernest R. May and Janet Fraser, eds., Campaign '72: The Managers Speak, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 27.

[10]James M. Perry, Us and Them: How the Press Covered the 1972 Election, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1973), pp. 52-59.

[11]Charles K. Atkin, et. al., "Quality versus Quantity in Televised Political Ads," Public Opinion Quarterly, 37: 209-24 (Summer 1973).

[12]Stuart H. Surlin and Thomas F. Gordon, "Selective Exposure and Retention of Political Advertising: A Regional Comparison," a paper presented to the International Communication Association, New Orleans, 1974.

[13]There were insufficient cases to control for exposure--which would have allowed us to see if exposure was a function of race and income. Likewise, we could not control for exposure. There was no relationship between recall of the commercials and sex, age, and educational level.

[14]The voters were asked: "Suppose there was someone who was undecided about who to vote for in the Presidential election. What would you tell that person about each candidate?"

An example of a "high affect" response is: (McGovern) "He's two-faced. He's awfully wishy-washy, promising an awful lot. He probably can't follow through." An example of a "low affect" response would be: (McGovern) "He has a sincere interest in the American poor. He has offered proposals to close tax loopholes." Feeling or affect is basically an impressionistic judgment, one often difficult to make reliably. Generally those responses which were more dominant in affect--over more rational listing or discussion of issues--were judged "high affect;" those with the reverse pattern were judged "low affect." After two training sessions, intercoder reliability among three coders reached .80, which was deemed acceptable.

[15]See Newsweek, November 13, 1972, pp. 30-31; and Time, November 6, 1972, pp. 42-43.

[16]Maxwell E. McCombs, "Editorial Endorsements: A Study of Influence," Journalism Quarterly, 44: 545-48 (Autumn 1967).